

Library looking at lures for teens

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ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

In a television ad for a national delivery service, an employee wearing squeaky shoes and pushing a squeaky-wheeled cart through an otherwise silent library is shushed by a stereotypical matronly librarian.

Jeff Baskin, director of North Little Rock's Laman Library, said he cringes when he sees that commercial because he says it reinforces an unflattering image of libraries full of whispers and shushes, a sure turnoff to many teenagers.

"Libraries for the most part have lost their teenagers," Baskin said. "We do need to find a way to bring them back."

And Baskin is contemplating a way to do just that.

Baskin has asked his library's board of trustees to explore adding special nights next year for interactive, multiplayer computer games through the Internet to promote sharing of information, peer interaction, writing ability and research skills — qualities libraries traditionally provide.

The notion is that the experience could open the eyes of many teenagers who haven't set foot in a library since their mothers took them for children's reading hour years before.

Teens are "probably the most difficult age group to get to the library," said Bobby Roberts, director of the Central Arkansas Library System, which is based in Little Rock and separate from the Laman Library. "We snag them back when they're 30 and they have children of their own."

Gaming — playing a video, Internet or computer game — can allow the players, or gamers, to go head-to-head with others or to join teams and play in cooperative multiplayer games. Some games, such as a map-based historical game, Sid Meier's Civilization III, require players to build a civilization with cities, transportation and armies.

Many games are research-oriented and include Web logs for gamers to talk to each other during play.

"It really hones their ability to read and think quickly on their feet," Baskin said. "Because blogging is a part of it, there is a lot of research involved."

"Let's say someone is planning a meal [in a game] and they've used food that never would have been eaten at that moment in time. A blogger might say that's not realistic, that's not accurate. It does require a lot of research skill."

The library is on schedule to upgrade its 25 public computers by 2007 but would upgrade a year early to download the gaming programs if approved, Baskin said.

Understanding and explaining the concept are big hurdles to jump first, Baskin acknowledged after floating the idea to the library's board earlier this month. More information will come at the trustees' December meeting.

"The kids I've talked to get really excited about it," Baskin said. "Adults are still kind of leery of it. ... When I mentioned gaming, a lot of people in that [boardroom] thought I was talking about gambling."

The gaming concept isn't new, Baskin said, as public libraries locally and across the United States have tried to attract the elusive teenage demographic.

Teenagers go to coffee shops and today's more diverse bookstores to study, do homework and congregate with friends, but don't do the same at their public library, Baskin said.

"I think a library is portrayed as a place where we constantly tell them to be quiet, they can't sit in groups and have all sorts of rules," he said. "There's a disconnect."

Public libraries in Austin, Texas, have begun "Wired for Youth" centers to provide computer access to teenagers. Some Boston-area libraries last month hosted game tournaments and movie screenings and offered pizza to reach out to the junior and senior high age groups.

Many libraries offer children's rooms and programs, but skip the teenage years in their planning and implementation, when it's that age group that will soon turn voting age and determine many libraries' future, Kevin King, teen services librarian for the Kalamazoo, Mich., public library, wrote in the October column for Voice of Youth Advocates.

"A teen who has a great library experience is probably a 'yes' vote when your library seeks new funds from the public," King wrote. "It's time to shake out the buns and put away the 'shushy' fingers. Let's open the library doors and invite the future inside."

The Central Arkansas Library System has held "open mike" nights for teens to read poetry, play music and "any kind of creative thing they wanted to do," said Lisa Donovan, manager of the Youth Services Department at the system's main library in Little Rock's River Market District. Help in seeking scholarships and financial aid for college has also been popular, she said.

College aid "is something they're interested in," said Donovan, who is working on her master's degree in library science at Texas Woman's University in Denton, Texas. "We've had some luck with book clubs, especially when we've tried to tie in to books that are made into movies or are on school reading lists."

This summer, the Central Arkansas Library System stretched beyond its own walls, presenting an overview of what the system's libraries offer, including recreational programs, to English classes at Central High School.

"We focused on letting kids know if they have a library card they can access library databases on the Internet," Donovan said. "We signed up every kid for a library card, and that's over 2,000 kids."

Little Rock's libraries haven't pursued the gaming concept, Donovan said, but could in the future if Laman Library's program in North Little Rock is successful.

"I'd be interested in watching what they're doing," she said. "Laman has some really good ideas.

"We've tried to look at what other libraries are doing and what they have success with. We have thought of doing some other game kinds of things, but, the thing is, by the time adults figure out what kids are doing, it's almost passe."

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